Woodpecker Woes

By Lisa Hutchins Sarcato

Spring brings with it nesting birds, territorial birdsong, and for some unlucky homeowners, the pecking of woodpeckers. Wood siding, wood trim, and stucco are the surfaces most vulnerable to pecking damage. Most pecking is minor or harmless. But in some cases, extensive pecking damage creates major headaches for homeowners.

First, What Kind of Woodpecker is it?

The usual culprit is the **northern flicker**, a common woodpecker in Front Range suburbs, foothills, and mountains up to 11,000 feet elevation. Flickers are about 12 inches long, greyish-brown, with black striping or 'barring' on the back and black spots underneath. Flickers also have a black chevron or crescent on their chest. When they fly, you'll see a white rump patch just above the tail. Red-shafted males have a red mark or 'mustache' on either side of their bill, while females are plain.

The Front Range is also home to small numbers of **yellow-shafted flickers**. Both males and females have yellow, rather than red, under their wings. Males have a black mustache and a red mark on the back or nape of the neck; females are plain. Hybrid flickers also exist, and these birds have some combination of either red or yellow-shafted field marks.

In rare cases, **downy woodpeckers** are responsible for pecking problems. Downies are small, about six or seven inches long, with black-and-white coloring and a short bill. Males have a red mark on the back of the head. Females have no red.

In the mountains, **pygmy nuthatches** occasionally become a pecking nuisance. Pygmies tend to roam in loose flocks unlike woodpeckers, which are usually solitary or in pairs. Pygmy nuthatches are about four inches long, with a grey-brown cap.

Not All Pecking is Damaging

There are different kinds of pecking, and it's important to distinguish between these types since not all pecking is damaging.

Birds sing to announce ownership of a nesting territory, which is why we most often hear birdsong during spring and summer nesting season. But woodpeckers can't sing- instead they drum. **Drumming** is a series of rapid, machine-gun-like vollies or rat-

a-tat-tats. This noise is often followed by a flicker singing a loud, high, repetitive, "wick-wick-wick-wick-wick" (to some ears, it sounds like "me-me-me-me-me"). Drumming usually takes place from March through early June. Although it is loud and annoying, drumming is not damaging and best overlooked.

Woodpeckers like to drum on resonant surfaces because these surfaces make an amplified sound. Males attract mates and announce ownership of an area by drumming. Drumming is also a way for mated pairs to keep track of each other's whereabouts. Woodpeckers often pick metal items for drumming, like downspouts and roof vent pipes, because they make an amplified sound.

When woodpeckers feed, they tap at tree bark to expose the insects inside. The pecking associated with **woodpecker feeding** sounds irregular and much more muted. Evidence of this kind of pecking is a number of very small holes in the building surface. This kind of pecking is rarely a problem along the Front Range area.

Woodpeckers are a type of bird that nests in a tree hole or cavity, rather than making a twig-and-stick nest. In springtime they carve out a cavity and use it as a secure place to raise their young. **Nest excavation pecking** sounds entirely different than feeding or drumming. This type of pecking is louder, slower, more regular, and more forceful than drumming. Many people report that is sounds like a carpenter hammering a nail. While drumming noise lasts only a few seconds, nest excavation hammering can continue for many minutes or even hours. Nest excavation pecking is most prevalent in the spring and early summer months when woodpeckers are preparing to nest. Some homeowners also experience nest pecking damage in the fall when flickers make winter roosting cavities.

Unlike drumming, nest excavation pecking is extremely damaging. Frequently the woodpecker pecks a hole in the siding, only to encounter insulation or a huge gap between the siding and interior walls. The confused bird may then move a few feet and start all over again. Signs of excavation pecking are one gaping hole, or several (even many) large "test" holes clustered around one area.

Why Don't Woodpeckers Just Use a Tree?

In the wild, woodpeckers carry out exploratory pecking on a variety of trees until they find a suitable candidate for nest-cavity excavation. Healthy trees are too hard to excavate, but dying trees are relatively soft in the middle, making it easy for woodpeckers to carve out a hole. A dead or dying tree sounds hollow when pecked, signaling to the bird that it's the right kind of material for excavation. And because wood siding or stucco walls also have a hollow sound when pecked or tapped, they sound "right" to a woodpecker- just like a dead tree. Since there are few suitable nesting places for woodpeckers- particularly in urban and suburban areas- buildings sometimes become nesting targets by default.

Only recently are we becoming aware of the importance of dead and dying trees in natural habitat and suburban areas. Woodpeckers and many other forms of wildlife

rely heavily on dead trees or snags. Dead trees are part of the natural cycle, and are commonly found in natural areas. But there are not many dead or dying trees in housing developments, parks, and suburbs. Homeowners and parks personnel scrupulously remove all dead or dying trees from developed areas, leaving few places for cavity-nesting birds like woodpeckers. And as open space and natural habitat areas are increasingly lost to housing developments, shopping centers, and commercial buildings, woodpeckers find themselves with fewer and fewer dead trees. In addition, aggressive non-native bird species such as European starlings often drive woodpeckers away from the few available natural nest sites.

Pygmy nuthatches have fewer mountain nesting sites because the mountains have become a popular place for people to live. Large numbers of new homeowners in mountain habitat and increased firewood cutting in ponderosa pine forests have left fewer mountain trees suitable for Pygmy nesting sites. Because pygmy nuthatches aren't able to nest and raise young as easily, their population has dropped dramatically. Pygmy nuthatches are now a Colorado Species of Special Concern- frequently the first step before becoming a threatened or endangered species.

What Can I Do About it?

Nest-excavation pecking can be a difficult problem. Although there are no easy solutions, it *is* usually possible to solve the problem with non-lethal methods if homeowners are willing to make the effort. Although you may feel frustrated enough to shoot the offending bird, consider carefully before taking this step. For one thing, woodpeckers and nuthatches (like most birds) are protected by strict state and federal laws. They may only be killed with the permission of the Colorado Division of Wildlife- and only if homeowners can demonstrate they've already exhausted all non-lethal options. But in any case, killing the woodpecker is generally an ineffective solution. For every flicker drilling a nest hole, there may be ten others searching for suitable territory. The flicker you shoot today may soon be replaced by another. Most people now realize that it's possible to reconcile conflicts with nuisance wildlife by using appropiate non-lethal methods. Killing nuisance wildlife is rarely a satisfying solution.

The following list includes exclusionary, repellent, and alternative nest site tactics. No one method works uniformly well for everyone. You may need to try one or more of these options before discovering what works best in your own situation.

1. Exclusionary Tactics

Cover the affected area where the woodpecker has drilled.

Bird netting

Use sheets of bird netting such as Bird-X (a type of flexible plastic netting sold in some garden centers to keep birds out of fruit trees). Attach the netting at the outer edge of the roof overhang or the eaves. Drop the length of netting down at an angle to the point where the wall meets the ground, leaving at least three inches of space between the netting and the damaged wall. Anchor it at the base of the wall so it is taunt. Secure at the wall corners. Be sure to cover the entire wall area. Leave it in place for at least several weeks, up to several months. ***Advantages:*** Most reliable method known. In

situations where woodpeckers are a severe or chronic problem, the netting may be left up year-round. ***Disadvantages:*** Several hours of work involving ladders; may need more than one person to complete. Moderate expense. Netting is unsightly at close range. Woodpeckers may move to an unprotected wall surface.

Plastic Tarp

Use a large, heavy-duty plastic sheet, tarp, or paint drop cloth. Attach the plastic tarp at the top of the wall immediately under the fascia. Leave the bottom edge unattached, if you want, so it can flap in the breeze as a further scare deterrent. The bird won't be able to attach itself to the slick plastic. Keep the sheet in place for several weeks, or until it is obvious the woodpecker has abandoned the area. ***Advantages:*** Usually a very reliable deterrent. ***Disadvantages:*** Several hours of work involving ladders; may need more than one person to complete. Moderate expense. Plastic cloth is very unsightly. Woodpeckers may move to an unprotected wall surface.

2. Repellent Tactics

Flashing or moving devices used to frighten birds in agricultural settings have sometimes worked to repel woodpeckers. Some garden centers and wild bird or backyard birdfeeding retail stores carry these bird repellents.

Scare Balloons

Scare Eye and Terror Eye are brand names for brightly-colored balloons that have a large eyeball design on each side. Birds find the design disturbing. The balloons are tethered close to the affected area and left in place for several weeks. ***Advantages:*** Fairly reliable deterrent, especially when more than one balloon is used. Minimal work to tether balloons. ***Disadvantages:*** Along with the birds, many humans find the balloons to be bizarre-looking or unsightly. Often difficult to locate a retail source.

Bird Scare Tape

Bird Scare Tape is silver on one side and metallic red on the other. Strips of tape are tacked up around the damaged area and left to blow around in the breeze. ***Advantages:*** Minimal cost and work. Not as unsightly as scare balloons. ***Disadvantages:*** Widely variable results; not always reliable.

Other Scare Objects Some homeowners use aluminum pie tins on string or strips of aluminum foil to achieve the same affect. Windsocks, toy plastic twirlers, windmills, pennants, and brightly-colored plastic strips can also be used. ***Advantages:*** With homemade objects, minimal or no cost. Little work to install. In the case of decorative objects, may be more aesthetically pleasing than other options. ***Disadvantages:*** Variable results; not always reliable.

Images of songbird predators can work very well or not at all, depending on what kind are used.

Hawk Kites

Kites in the image of hawks (or other birds of prey such as ospreys or eagles) are tethered near the affected area and left to soar in the breeze, looking like a predatory hawk searching for prey. These kites are sometimes available from backyard bird feeding stores or kite stores. ***Advantages:*** As long as there is a breeze or wind, hawk kites are realistic looking and can be very effective deterrents. More aesthetically pleasing than

many other options. ***Disadvantages:*** Effectiveness depends on weather conditions. Expensive. Often difficult to locate a retail source. Will exclude all other bird species from the area, not just the woodpecker species.

Plastic Statues
Images of owls, hawks, cats, snakes, and other predators. While this is the method most commonly recommended by garden centers, in fact only a handful of homeowners have ever reported any success with these products. ***Advantages:*** Low cost. Easily available. ***Disadvantages:*** Extremely low success rate. Quickly perceived by birds to be inanimate objects. To appear life-like, must be moved at least once a day (preferably more often).

Scare the bird yourself by making noise with metal pans or garbage can lids, or by squirting the bird with the garden hose. ***Advantages:*** If done consistently, can be a reliable deterrent. ***Disadvantages:*** Effectiveness usually depends on frequency of action. Must be done consistently all day long for several days in a row, or even several weeks, depending on the bird's determination and skittishness. You may wear out before the bird does. And, your neighbors may think you're more annoying than the woodpeckers!

3. Alternative Nest Site

Put up a nestbox. Downy woodpeckers and pygmy nuthatches rarely or never use a man-made nestbox, but flickers will readily accept a nestbox. Pre-built flicker nestboxes are available at backyard birdfeeding stores. You can also build your own flicker box (see instructions on last page). If there are few European starlings in your area, flicker nestboxes work very well, especially when used in conjunction with exclusionary techniques on damaged areas. In fact, if a nestbox is put up early in the bird's nesting cycle close to the damaged area, most flickers will immediately move to the box. But if there are starlings present, there's a high probability the starlings will drive off the flickers and use the box themselves. Starlings are very aggressive birds and will fight (or even kill) to retain a good nesting site. Squirrels may also take over the box. Flickers usually loose out to starlings or squirrels in disputes over nestboxes. The ousted flickers often return to the original damaged area to begin excavation all over again. ***Advantages:*** Success rate very high in areas with few competitor wildlife species. Moderate cost. Satisfying solution for both people and flickers. Box may be reused by birds every nesting season for many years. ***Disadvantages:*** In areas with competitor wildlife species, success rate is very low. Box requires construction and mounting. Set-up labor may be extensive in areas without existing nestbox sites, especially if necessary to erect a post.

Additional Considerations

- If using more than one solution, don’t create a conflicting situation or you won't get anywhere with your efforts. It makes no sense to use a flicker nestbox (an attractant) along with a scare device (a repellent) - for example, setting up a plastic owl close to a nestbox. But complimentary methods - for instance, using netting to exclude the woodpecker, while also giving it an alternative nest site such as a nestbox - may work well together.

- Once the woodpeckers have been discouraged or frightened away from an inappropriate nesting area, cover or repair the damage to prevent other woodpeckers from being attracted to the holes.
- Whenever possible, try to give woodpeckers and other wildlife the best site possible - a dead tree or snag. Unless a dead tree poses a safety hazard or a threat to healthy trees, leave it in place on your property as natural wildlife habitat.

Not Recommended

- Repellents sold on the basis of smell are almost certain to fail. Unlike mammals, birds don't have an appreciable sense of smell.
- Sticky substances (Tanglefoot and other polybutene products) used to keep the birds from roosting or perching are messy and may ruin building surfaces. More importantly, their use is not recommended because the substances often injure birds and other wildlife.
- Bitter substances such as Ro-Pel (denatonium saccharide) are sprayed on wood siding and repel on the basis of taste. However, the possibility of staining, the large amounts needed to cover building walls, and the lack of documented results make this an impractical solution.
- Loud repellents such as acoustical alarms, bird distress calls, and pyrotechnic devices are expensive and as annoying to people as they are to birds. For obvious reasons, they are generally not an option in populated areas.

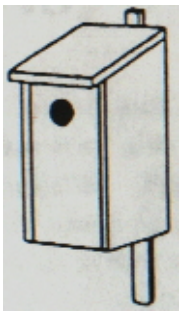
Develop a Sense of Perspective

No doubt you're feeling frustration or anger over nest-excavation damage. But keep this in mind:

- You aren't alone in the problem. Anyone who lives in an area with mature trees is likely at some point to have an interaction with woodpeckers.
- Try to maintain a sense of humor. Hey, even NASA isn't immune. In 1995 an extraordinarily ambitious flicker couple pecked hundreds of holes in the foam insulation of the shuttle's external propellant tank, delaying the launch of the space shuttle *Discovery*.
- Remember that people helped create the situation. Loss of natural areas to human development and competition from human-introduced species like starlings have left fewer and fewer nesting sites for woodpeckers. Woodpeckers are essentially struggling to do what they can with the little that's left to them.
- Your home is not being singled out for vandalism simply because woodpeckers have malicious intent in mind. They're responding to an overwhelmingly powerful biological urge to find a mate, set up housekeeping, and raise their young. Like all creatures, they're doing what they are supposed to do to perpetuate the species. And when you think about the damage mankind has done throughout history responding to *human* biological imperatives, the peckings of a few flickers can seem pretty insignificant!

See back page for flicker nest box plans and flicker facts.

Northern Flicker Nestbox



Nestbox Dimensions

Entrance hole diameter: 2 1/2" to 3"
Height of hole above the floor: 10" to 20"
Inside floor dimensions: 8" X 8" to 9" X 9"
Total height of box: 14" to 24"
Placement: 8' to 20' up on a tree or post
Construction: Rough-cut western cedar and screws are preferred; pine may warp. Make sure a front or side panel of the box can be easily opened for annual cleaning.

Tips for Nestbox Success

- *The box must be stationary and mounted against a vertical object, such as a post or tree trunk. Hanging or free-swinging boxes are not attractive to flickers.*
- *Don't put a perch near the entrance hole. A perch is completely unnecessary and may even encourage aggressive, non-native bird species to take over the box.*
- *Mount the box at least 8' up on a tree or post.*
- *Birds prefer an unobstructed flight path to the nestbox. Avoid situating the nest among lots of branches. Try to place the box so the entrance hole is facing east, southeast, or south, rather than north or west.*
- *Put several inches of cedar shavings in the bottom of the nestbox. You can even pack the entire box completely full of shavings. Shavings seem to make the box more attractive to flickers. Flickers like to excavate shavings from the nest box as preparation for nesting. A nestbox packed with shavings also helps deter (at least temporarily) starlings or squirrels from taking over the box. In addition, cedar shavings are thought to have insect repelling properties and may protect nestlings from parasites. Shavings are available pre-packaged at pet supply shops, some backyard birdfeeding stores, and the pet food aisle of many grocery and discount outlets.*
- *Clean out the box in the fall. Discard old shavings or nesting material, and replace with fresh shavings.*

Flicker Facts

Breeding period: April to July
Territory size: Flickers defend a nesting area approximately 1/2 to 1 acre in size.
Incubation period: The eggs are incubated for 11-12 days by both parents before hatching.
Nesting phase: The hatched young are in the nest approximately 26 days before leaving the site.
Fledgling phase: After the young leave the nest they are attended by their parents for 2-3 weeks before setting out on their own.
Broods: Flicker pairs can produce 1-2 broods (batches of young) per season.
Diet: Flickers eat insects, ants, seeds, nuts, and grains. Flickers consume many harmful pest insects from trees. They are a primary predator of ants, and are the only woodpecker that feeds on the ground.